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English in fëanorian

In his article on this subject in Mallorn 14, David Masson set out his system for writing English in the Elvish tengwar. Here is a response from a fellow-linguist, Steve Pillinger:

David Masson has given a very useful exposition of how to use the tengwar phonemically in English. However in certain important respects I feel that it fails in its aim of providing a system "adequate phonetically" (as Tolkien suggested); and these points ought to be raised for the benefit of people wanting to use the system (which is otherwise excellent).

Firstly, David Masson's use of two *r*'s (*n* and *y*) for English: this is quite unjustified phonemically. I know of no variety of English that has two *r*-sounds. The so-called 'silent *r*' of British English 'here', 'bird' and 'car' can hardly be called an *r*-sound, since it is not pronounced — and the purpose of a phonemic writing system is to represent (only) that which is actually pronounced. The three words 'here', 'bird' and 'car' would be written phonemically as /hi:ə, bæ:d, ka:/ in British English. *R* is never pronounced in a word like 'bird' — so that David Masson's use of *n* for this vowel-sound is redundant: *h* would be quite sufficient on its own. (An *r* will, however, sometimes be heard at the end of words like 'here' & 'car': this is when a vowel immediately follows — e.g., 'Here is...', 'The car in question...'. This *r* could be written — but it is identical in sound to any other *r*, and certainly gives no justification for using two different *r*-tengwar.)

Secondly, there is the restriction of the downhook for final *-s* (*s*) to plural-forms only (p.28). Again, this has no phonemic justification. The *s* on the end of 'fits' (plural noun) has exactly the same sound as the *s* on the end of 'fits' (singular verb), and should be represented the same way.

Thirdly, David Masson's representation of long vowels is not fully consistent. Tolkien says that these may be written either as doubled short vowels, or with the long carrier (*l*). However David Masson has *i* and *u* written as /iy/ and /uw/ (*λ* & *δ*); *e* written as *é*; and *a*, *o* & *o* all doubled (*ā*, *ō*, *ō*). It would surely make better sense, both orthographically and phonemically, to use the same kind of representation for all six."

Finally, I can't agree with David Masson that "it is impossible to cater for dialects" (p.22). He's already done just this — for the southern British and North American dialects! His representations of these are just as far removed from the orthography as, say, Australian or Irish or South African English would be. Why should Australians, for instance, have to master *British* (or *American*) pronunciation before they can start using the tengwar phonemically? 'Standard' British and American may be considered by some as the 'prestige' dialects; but if an Australian wants to write *píþ* (/peənd/) for 'pound', why on middle-earth shouldn't he?

— *Spjlk . pēty* — [Steve Pillinger]